

The Wrack Line

Newsletter of Parker River National Wildlife Refuge • Newburyport, MA



United States Fish & Wildlife Service

Fall, 2011

A Great Day at Great Bay!

By Matt Poole, Visitor Services Manager

In late August, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar paid a visit to Great Bay National Wildlife Refuge in Newington, NH. His visit included a guided boat tour of Great Bay, a meeting with a diverse group of local conservation partners, and a brief stop at the Refuge to celebrate the recent completion of the new boardwalk on the Peverly Pond Trail. As part of that celebration, the Secretary conferred congratulatory certificates to this year's Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) crew members (from both Great Bay and Parker River NWRs). YCC crews are comprised of local high school-aged youth.

For each of the last three summers, the Great Bay YCC crew focused its productive energies on building the new boardwalk. What resulted is a wonderful, handicap-accessible pathway through a woodland that offers, among other things, views of a pond and seasonal wetlands (vernal pools).

In addition to the Peverly Pond trail, Refuge visitors can walk the two mile-long Ferry Way Trail. This looped pathway follows along the rusting perimeter fence of the former weapons storage facility – *a very interesting vestige of the Cold War!* – and then passes through a mix of open field and forested habitats. About halfway through the trail, an observation deck offers commanding views of tidal water. Recently a series of interpretive panels were installed along the Ferry Way Trail – a project completed by Shayan Banerjee, a summer intern who divided his time between Parker River and Great Bay NWRs. Both trailheads, along with an interpretive kiosk and public restrooms, are located at the parking area adjacent to Refuge headquarters.

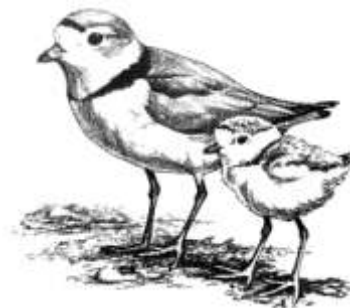


Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar talks with YCC crew members while walking along the new YCC-built boardwalk trail.

Great Bay NWR, which was de-staffed as part of a necessary, region-wide belt-tightening effort several years ago, is currently administered by the refuge manager and staff at Parker River NWR. The 1400 acre refuge came into being in 1992 as a result of land transferred from the Department of Defense, in the wake of the Pease Air Force Base closure.

Directions to Great Bay NWR are available on the Refuge web site:

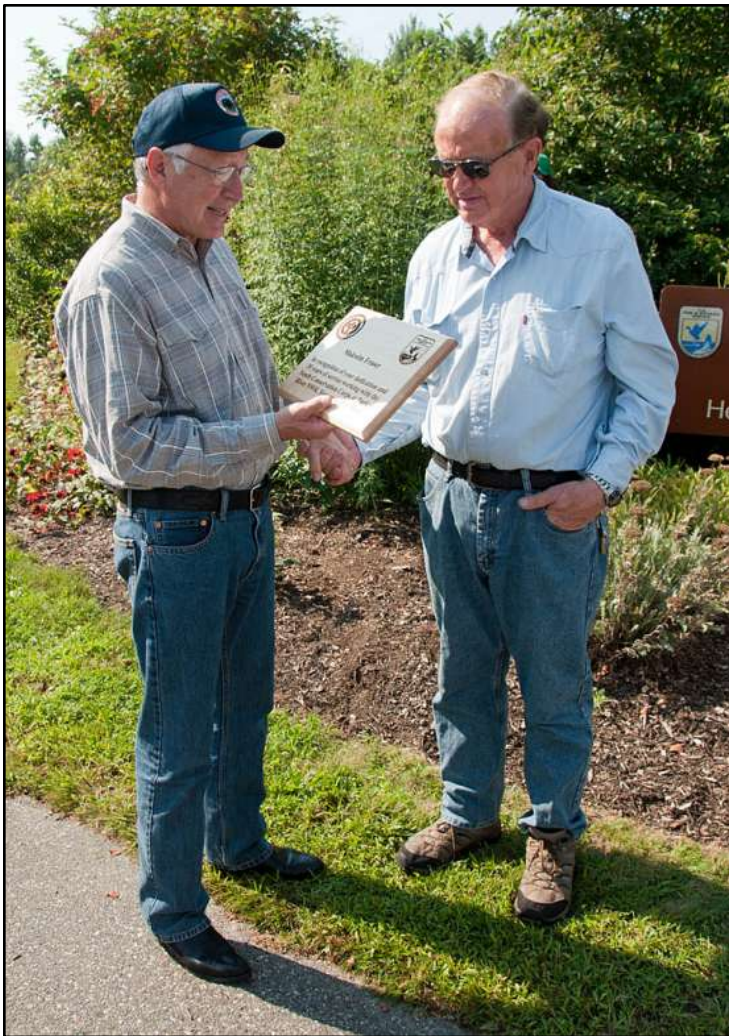
<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/greatbay/>



Mal Fraser: A YCC Conservation Hero!

By Matt Poole, Visitor Services Manager

The Youth Conservation Corps program at Parker River NWR began in the early 1970s. And one of the original leaders of that program is still at it, having just completed his 35th year of Service. As he has done for so many summers before, Mal Fraser cheerfully led and mentored a small group of local teens through eight weeks of outdoor, hands-on, refuge-improving work. This year's primary project was completion of one of the boardwalks that provides refuge visitors with access to the ocean beach. While the kids involved with Parker River's



Veteran YCC leader Mal Fraser accepts "Conservation Hero" award from Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar.

YCC program always learn valuable skills through their work projects, they also gain much from their experience working for and with Mal.



As a YCC leader, Mal has given much to America's youth, and to the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Service recently had an opportunity to show its appreciation to Mal. During a mid-August visit to Great Bay NWR to celebrate completion of a new YCC-constructed boardwalk, Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar took the time to present Mal with a "Conservation Hero" award and thanked him for his long years of dedicated service.

While thinking about his history with the youth program, Mal reflected "the clear success of YCC is due to the teamwork established by all involved. From the top of the Department of Interior, to FWS national and regional offices, and the Parker River NWR staff and YCC groups, all together have lead to the success and life of the YCC. A great lesson for these young people who join us in the summer is how to help improve the environment of the refuge. I feel thankful and proud to have been a part of such a great program and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service."

In most years, local teens are hired to serve on YCC crews at both Parker River National Wildlife Refuge in Newburyport and Great Bay National Wildlife Refuge in Newington, NH. For the summer of 2011, a crew of six worked at Parker River, with a crew of four based at Great Bay.

YCC crew member applications are available in the spring and can be obtained at refuge headquarters or downloaded from the refuge web site. Applicants must be at least 15 years of age and cannot turn 19 during the program. YCC crew members work for eight weeks, beginning in late June. For further information, contact the refuge in the spring.

To Warmer Weather: Bird Migration

By Kaytee Steinkerchner, Biological Technician

It's that time of year again. The nights are cooler, the leaves start changing, and birds are moving in flocks toward the warmer weather to the south. Although you might watch them longingly, wishing you could join them, have you ever thought about the journey they take? It's no easy task. They have no airplanes they can hitch a ride on. They must flap their wings several thousand miles, only stopping a few times along the way to eat. It's these stopover areas that are truly the most important part of the trip.

Our little Plum Island is one of these crucial stopover spots. Birds travelling along the Atlantic coast touch down here at Parker River NWR to refuel in the many habitats we provide. Shorebirds come through starting at the end of July and continuing through September, taking advantage of the pools and mudflats found naturally in the saltmarsh or the same habitats we create for them in two of our impoundments. You will even find a whole bunch of shorebirds feeding on the beach. Songbirds will make their appearance from September through early November. They use our dense maritime shrubs to feed on berries and insects. Later in the fall, late September through ice over, waterfowl will flock to the open water in our impoundments and even the saltmarsh.



Tree swallows amass on the refuge late August and September.



Yellow Warbler by Jim Fenton

Maintaining stocked buffets for birds is no walk in the park. Although nature lends a helping hand, the staff at the refuge works tirelessly throughout the year to make sure the birds have the habitat they need when they arrive. This involves lots of time changing the water levels in two of our three impoundments. Bill Forward and Stage Island pools are managed to provide shallow water and exposed mud when shorebirds are coming through the area. Before the ducks arrive, these impoundments are re-flooded to create the deeper water habitat they prefer.

Creating plentiful food resources for migrating songbirds is something we work hard at. The maritime shrubs on the refuge are crucial for providing plentiful berries to migrating birds. Bayberries, black cherries, and beach plums are native species providing ample fruit. But we also have honeysuckle and glossy buckthorn, two invasive species that produce large numbers of berries each year. These berries have low nutritional value for songbirds and are like "bird junk food". The biological staff monitors berries to determine which types are being eaten. We may be trying to eliminate invasive shrubs from the refuge, but if we learn they are an important food or cover source for migrating birds, we'll have to think twice about this management action.

Next time you're out on the refuge during the fall, take a look in all the different habitats for migrating birds. Then be glad you don't need to eat your own weight in berries or worms each day when you want to fly to Florida.

The Plight of the Bat

By Kaytee Steinkerchner, Biological Technician

Cute and cuddly might not be the words used when one thinks of bats, but helpful and helpless should be. Bats are desperately important as consumers of insects, including agricultural and human pests. An average bat will consume two pounds of insects in a single night, and if you think about how tiny a mosquito is, that's a lot of those little blood suckers! Over the past five years, bats have been helpless to defend themselves against the deadly white-nose syndrome (WNS). Since this fungus was discovered on bats hibernating in a mine in New York State, over one million bats have succumbed to it. It has been found in the US from Maine to North Carolina and west to Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee. It has also been found in five Canadian provinces. Identifiable by a white substance on the nose and wings of hibernating bats, this fungus causes the bats to arouse from their slumber, only to burn all fat reserves. Hungry, active bats find no insects during winter, causing them to die of starvation. With no known cure, bats that hibernate in large groups in caves or mines, which are our most numerous species, are declining at alarming rates.



Photo by Chris Harshaw

The eastern red bat was the dominant "catch" in a recent mist netting operation at Parker River NWR.

We find this issue very important here at Parker River NWR and especially at our sister refuge, Great Bay NWR in Newington, NH. Yearly since 2008, we will catch bats in mistnets down by Hellcat for two to three nights in August. Lots of bats migrate through the refuge at this time of year. By catching them, we collect information on why bats are using the refuge.

We can compare the data between years to see if the species composition is changing, and if the numbers of bats are changing. This is also done twice a year at Great Bay. Once in July to determine which bats are using the refuge for breeding and again in August to determine who's migrating through. Along with the mist netting, we use special microphones and tape recorders to record the calls of bats, which we use to identify the species that are present.

Taking a simple stand back and watch approach is not our style. Instead, we're working on transforming the old weapon storage bunkers at Great Bay NWR (once part of Pease Air Force Base) into fungus free hibernating areas. Although we are still early on in the process, and there's no guarantee that bats will use them, it's worth the effort to save these fascinating and important creatures.

How You Can Help Bat Conservation:

- Build and install a bat house to provide a place for surviving bats to raise their young.
<http://www.batconservation.org>
- Don't kill bats that get into your attic. Call a professional who will safely remove it. Or let them stay.
- Stay out of caves used by hibernating bats. The spread of WNS has been accelerated by humans going from cave to cave. If you do go to a cave, sterilize your clothing and gear.
<http://www.caves.org/WNS/WNS%20Decon%20for%20Cavers%2001.25.11.pdf>

Summer 2011 Plover Report:

By Jim Panaccione, Biological Technician



Piping Plover and Chick

Image by Jim Panaccione

Under the watchful eye of the Refuge staff and volunteers, the 2011 season proved to be rather fruitful for Plum Island's piping plovers. This summer the Refuge beach was home to 19 pairs of plovers, where they were able to raise 34 fledglings. This was the second largest population on Massachusetts' north shore and the second highest totals since the Refuge began protecting the species. It is also encouraging to see that nesting pairs have returned to higher numbers after a slight dip from 2004 to 2008 (Fig. 1).

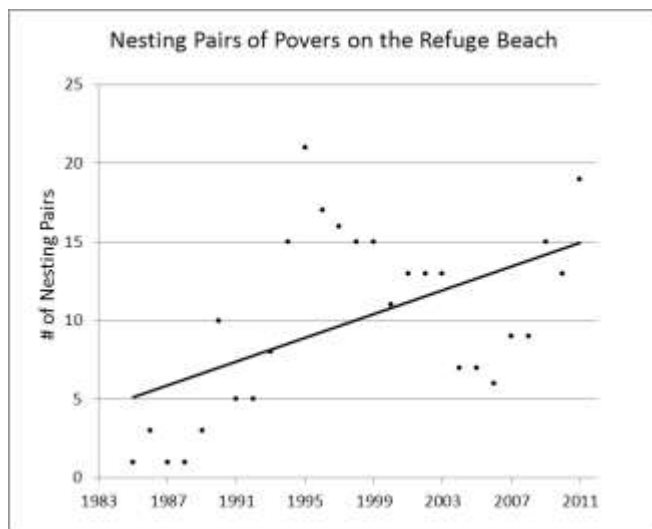


Figure 1 – Total nesting pairs of piping plovers on the Parker River NWR beach from 1985 to 2011.

As usual the plovers arrived mid – April but were off to a rough start. By the second week of May seven pairs had their nests washed out by storm-tides. However, all seven pairs re-nested and by

early June they were joined by 12 neighbors. Several pairs even nested on top of the dunes or in blow-outs on the back side of the dunes. This strategy not only keeps the nests protected from surging tides, but also seems to aid in predator avoidance. In fact, only one nest was predated this year!

Other island beaches weren't quite as productive as the Refuge but Sandy Point had seven nesting pairs, producing 10 fledglings, and for the first time in four years the

Newburyport town beach had a nesting pair that was able to fledge one chick. A big accomplishment for such a busy beach!

As mid-August came around many of the adult plovers began to flock with other migrants and start their journey south. Their young however would stick around a little longer before they too were flocking together and heading south. By the end of August our resident plovers were well on their way, but we look forward to seeing them again next year when they return from their wintering grounds along the Gulf coast and eastern shores of Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas.



Kodak Moments from Photo Camp!

By Matt Poole, Visitor Services Manager

The Refuge hosted its first-ever weeklong photo camp in late July. Ten local high school-age youth spent a week learning and practicing the basics of photography (exposure and composition) and image editing. The core of the camp's instructional model is, simply, "learning by doing." Right from the camp's "opening bell" on Monday morning, the idea was to get the kids outdoors taking pictures *of* nature while immersed *in* nature.



Armed with loaner digital single lens reflex cameras (owned by the Refuge), camp participants trained their lenses on a variety of subjects throughout the week. First there were wildflowers to capture behind the visitor center. Four live raptors (from the York Center for Wildlife) appeared in the same setting for a photo shoot on Monday afternoon. Then there were photo safaris to Maudsley State Park, Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm, and Minute Man National Historical Park. A visit to The Butterfly Place (in Westford, MA) provided refuge from oppressively hot, humid weather and netted beautiful images of a dizzying array of colorful, winged species. Each setting and subject provided unique opportunities to practice image-making.

The other half of the digital photography "universe" involves improving images on a computer. Thanks to the generosity of the Governor's Academy in nearby Byfield, campers were able to work on



their images in a modern (and air conditioned!) computer lab.

Based on the quality (beauty, really) of the participants' images, the inaugural photo camp was an unabashed success! Refuge visitors may bear witness to this success by viewing framed prints of the kids' work, which will be on exhibit in the visitor center for the next year.

Nature and wildlife photography is one of the "Big Six" wildlife-dependent public uses that are encouraged across the National Wildlife Refuge System. Aided by the newly formed Parker River NWR Photo Group, the Refuge will be offering additional photography-based programming, for a variety of target groups, in the months and years ahead.



The Friends Corner

Hello all! Let me first take this opportunity to thank Ranger Poole and Refuge Manager Graham Taylor for giving us the opportunity to contribute to this publication. As many of you already know, the Friends of Parker River National Wildlife Refuge is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization dedicated to supporting, sustaining, and educating the public about the natural resources and habitat that exists within the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge. We are an entirely volunteer run organization. Proceeds from membership in the Friends and from sales within its store, the Plovers Nest, go towards sponsoring and supporting programs in conjunction with the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service which raise awareness of the habitat, flora, and fauna that are protected by the Refuge. Through financial, volunteer, and developmental support, the Friends seek to raise a heightened public awareness of the Refuge within the community and an appreciation of its protected resources.



In the past, we have provided financial assistance in replacing a specialized wheelchair allowing handicapped persons access to the beachfront and replacement of indigenous plants and trees to an area that needed to be restored its natural condition following the construction of the new visitor contact station in parking lot one. To date, we have continued to co-sponsor a monthly coffeehouse lecture series which has presented topics including: a wildlife photography show by renowned World



Wildlife Federation photographer Steve Morello; a presentation by local state Division of Marine Fisheries biologist Matt Ayers on aquatic wildlife native to Plum Island and the Merrimack River; and, a slideshow narrative by local historian Michael Bulger, showcasing the cultural

history of Plum Island in connection with Newburyport's Yankee Homecoming festival. We have also supported the Refuge's establishment of a new digital photography summer camp for high school age children by writing and applying for a grant to fund the program. Unfortunately, due to the large number of applicants competing for the same grant, our grant writing efforts were unsuccessful but alternative funding sources were secured by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Ranger Poole's Digital Photography Camp became the great success that we always knew it would be!

Our board and members have in addition to selflessly devoting their time to volunteering to run our organization and its store, also provided countless hours of their time to also being Refuge Volunteers as Plover Wardens, Visitor Center contact ambassadors, and providing volunteer assistance at events which have included: the annual Newburyport Eagle Festival; Let's Go Fishing; Refuge Open Houses, and the Topsfield Fair. Most recently, the Friends have created a modest \$500.00 educational scholarship that will be presented to a local high school student who has demonstrated an interest and aptitude in wildlife and/or environmental studies. I invite you to visit our website at www.parkerriver.org and contact any of our board members if you are interested in assisting us in any capacity in our store and organizational operations. Thank you all for your continued time and support!

Very truly yours,

Douglas C. Brink, President
Friends of Parker River National Wildlife Refuge

Volunteers Still Needed in Off-Season

By Jean Adams, Outdoor Recreation Planner

Although our busy season is over, volunteers are still needed. The information desk is open seven days a week from 9am-4pm. The current volunteers take vacations, get sick, or have holiday obligations, so alternates are always needed. This is an important job as school groups and retirees (who have taken to the road after the tourist season is over) tend to be frequent visitors in the off season. In addition, the biologists look for help with their compilation of field data. This is tedious but very necessary work, as this data helps the biologists determine management practices which benefit Refuge habitat and wildlife. We are always looking for people interested in leading tours or running environmental education programs. This year we started offering the "Behind the Scenes Tour." This has proven very popular and has even been full when offered mid-week. If anyone is interested in learning how to give this tour, or has an interest in developing their own tour, they should contact me, Jean Adams. Anyone interested in doing environmental education programs for school groups, or even adults, should contact Matt Poole or myself.

Sometimes people are shy about conducting a program, but a little practice is often all that is needed to help find their comfort zone. I guarantee that you will learn as you teach others. It's a valuable skill - helping others understand what is around them. With this new understanding comes increased appreciation for refuges and encourages support for the role they play in protecting our natural resources. As a volunteer, you could be part of this vital mission.

Meet Steve Mangion, Refuge Volunteer!

By Jean Adams, Outdoor Recreation Planner

Steve Mangion started volunteering as a plover warden 13 years ago when he moved from Washington D.C.. Steve's day job as a geologist working on Superfund sites for the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) in the Office of Research and Development requires him to travel quite a bit. All that travel makes coming back to his

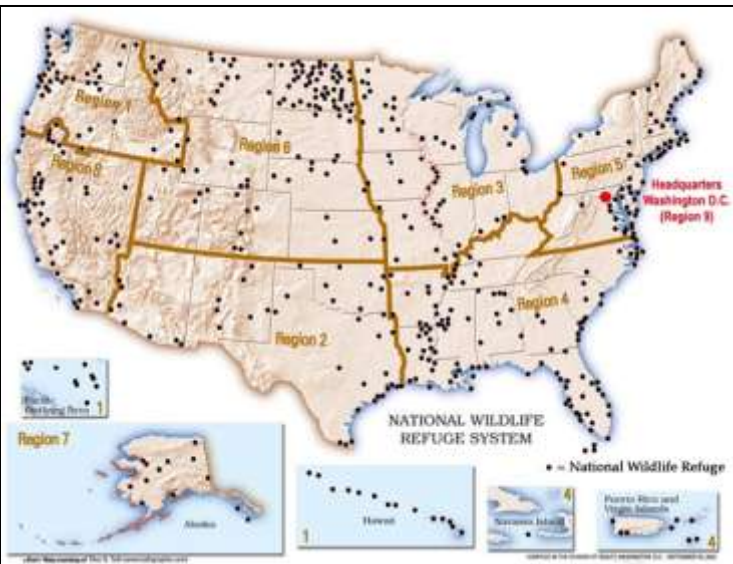


idyllic home on Plum Island something he values a great deal. Looking to help protect the beauty and undeveloped land surrounding him, he decided to volunteer for the Refuge. By doing so, Steve said that he helps "Protect the environment which in turn protects the wildlife."

He says that the biggest issue he sees on the Refuge is "too many people not respecting the boundaries and the rules." As a plover warden, Steve believes he has made a difference in the public perception of the Refuge and the importance of protecting the plovers. When asked what he views as his role as a warden, Steve says "I open ears and open minds, helping people appreciate the Refuge and its role in protecting wildlife."

His love for the island and the dunes has made Steve the "Johnny Appleseed" of beach grass. This year he has planted beach grass springs along the dunes near the gatehouse which were compromised during the installation of the water and sewer line. Every little bit helps. The little things add up to the big things. Everybody can make a difference. We thank you, Steve for doing your part!

Parker River NWR is one of 553 national wildlife refuges comprising the 150 million acre **National Wildlife Refuge System**. The mission of the system is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.



The Refuge System is administered according to the following principles:

- We are land stewards, guided by Aldo Leopold's teachings that land is a community of life and that love and respect for the land is an extension of ethics. We seek to reflect that land ethic in our stewardship and to instill it in others.
- Wild lands and the perpetuation of diverse and abundant wildlife are essential to the quality of the American life.
- We are public servants. We owe our employers, the American people, hard work, integrity, fairness, and a voice in the protection of their trust resources.
- Management, ranging from preservation to active manipulation of habitats and populations, is necessary to achieve Refuge System and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service missions.
- Wildlife-dependent uses involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, and education, when compatible,

are legitimate and appropriate uses of the Refuge System.

- Partnerships with those who want to help us meet our mission are welcome and indeed essential.
- Employees are our most valuable resource. They are respected and deserve an empowering, mentoring, and caring work environment.
- We respect the rights, beliefs, and opinions of our neighbors.



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On the Web:

<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/parkerriver/>

We are also on Facebook!